

# THE GREAT STRIKE

**THE MINERS' STRIKE OF 1984-5  
AND ITS LESSONS**

**Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons**



**A *Socialist Worker* publication**



Published April 1985

by Socialist Worker, PO Box 82, London E2.

Distribution by Bookmarks, 265 Seven Sisters Road,  
Finsbury Park, London N4 2DE, England.

Jointly published as International Socialism 27/28 (1985).

ISBN 0 905998 50 2

Printed by Krips Repro, Meppel, Netherlands.

Typeset by Kate Macpherson Photosetting, Clevedon,  
Avon. Design by Peter Court.

Photographs by John Sturrock, except for pages 69 and  
173 (Keith Pattison), pages 81 and 160-1 (Ron  
Richardson), page 86 (Martin Shakeshaft), pages 112-3  
(John Harris), page 122 (Denis Doran), and page 147  
(Stafano Cagnoni, IFL).



**Socialist Worker** is the weekly paper of the Socialist  
Workers Party, which is one of a group of international  
socialist organisations:

**AUSTRALIA: International Socialists**, GPO Box  
1437N, Melbourne 3001.

**BRITAIN: Socialist Workers Party**, PO Box 82, London  
E2.

**CANADA: International Socialists**, PO Box 339, Station  
E, Toronto, Ontario.

**DENMARK: Internationale Socialister**, Vestergade 24,  
1 tv, 8000 Arhus C.

**IRELAND: Socialist Workers Movement**, c/o 41  
Herberton Park, Rialto, Dublin 8.

**UNITED STATES: International Socialist Organisation**,  
PO Box 16085, Chicago, Illinois 60616.

**WEST GERMANY: Sozialistische Arbeiter Gruppe**,  
Wolfgangstrasse 81, D-6000 Frankfurt 1.



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This book is very much a result of collective efforts. It draws heavily on the coverage of the miners' strike in **Socialist Worker**, some of which we wrote. We are grateful to Peter Clark, Tony Cliff, Chris Harman, Sheila MacGregor, and Peter Marsden for helping to improve a manuscript written at great speed. Also to the staff of **Socialist Worker**. Above all, this book would have been impossible without the assistance given us by the many miners who spoke to us before, during and after the strike. Unfortunately the National Coal Board's attempts to victimise militants mean that we cannot acknowledge the help we received from these miners by name. That is why the only miners named in the book are NUM officials. Our thanks to all who talked to us. The book follows the general analysis of the strike developed by the Socialist Workers Party: any errors of fact or of judgement are, however, our own.

Alex Callinicos

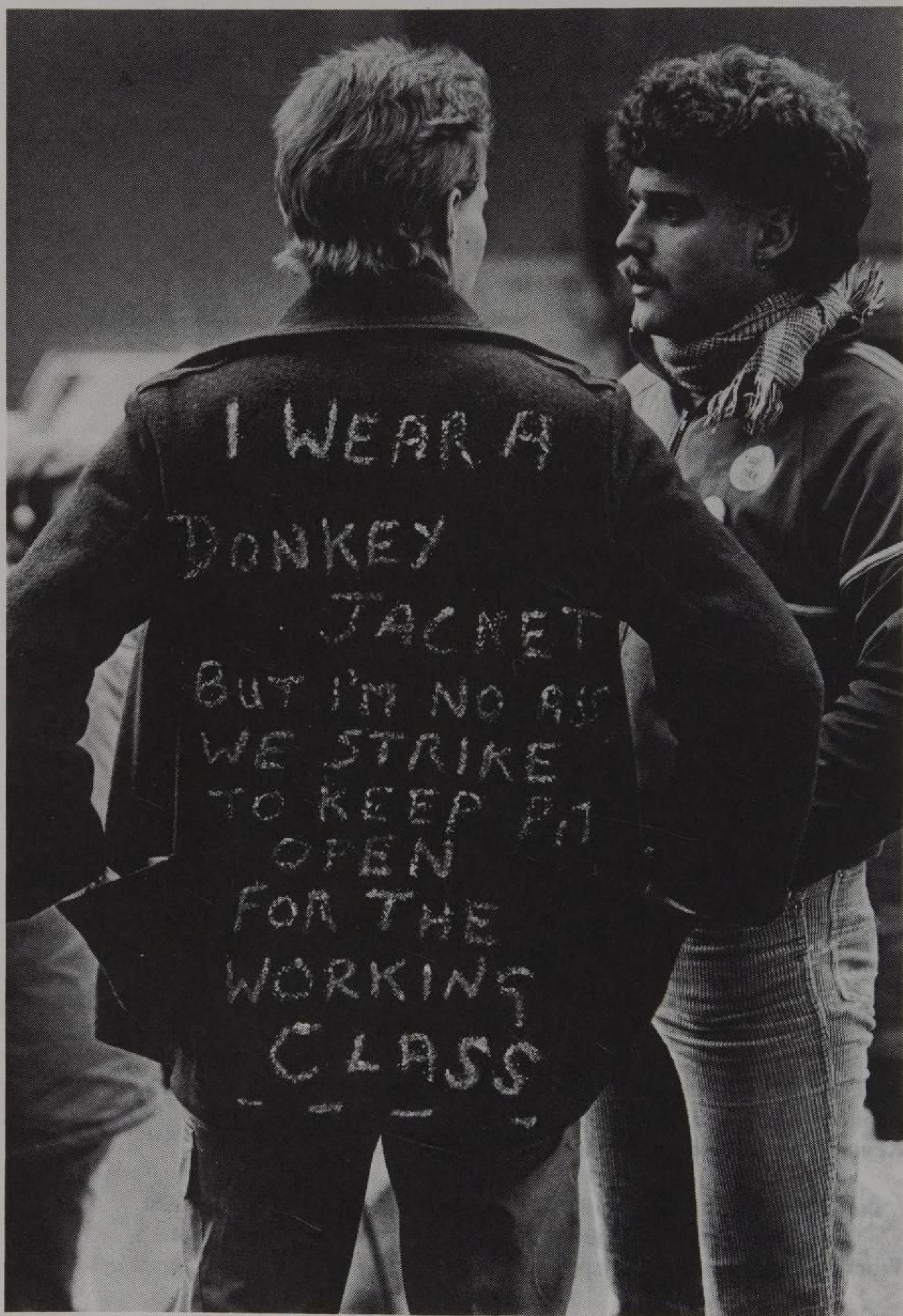
Mike Simons

12 March 1985

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I WEAR A  
DONKEY  
JACKET  
BUT I'M NO ASS  
WE STRIKE  
TO KEEP AN  
OPEN  
FOR THE  
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CLASS



## INTRODUCTION

ON 1 MARCH 1984 the National Coal Board announced that Cortonwood colliery in South Yorkshire would be closed. The miners and their families were horrified. They had been told that the pit would stay open for another five years. Entire villages such as Brampton depended on the pit as their only source of employment.

Susan Bradshaw, a miner's wife from Brampton, said: 'It was like a shock wave going through the village when the Coal Board said the pit would close in five weeks. People were really desperate because they knew that there were no other jobs to go to.'

Three days later the Cortonwood branch of the National Union of Mineworkers voted unanimously for a strike by the whole Yorkshire coalfield to stop the closure. No one realised that it would be the beginning of the longest major strike in the history of the British working-class movement.

Few people expected much to happen at all. In the years since Margaret Thatcher had become prime minister in May 1979 many communities like Brampton had been destroyed by closures. Millions of jobs had disappeared. The trade unions had mounted little resistance to the tidal wave of unemployment which swept through industrial Britain. Much the same was true of the labour movement in the rest of the western world. Many commentators, some of them socialists, had concluded that the industrial working class was finished.

How could the miners stand against the tide? Once they had humbled governments, in the great strikes of 1972 and 1974. But many believed the mineworkers' union was a shadow of its former self. In the three years since 1981 the NCB had got rid of 41,000 jobs



in the face of no effective opposition. Arthur Scargill, the NUM president, had been humiliated in three successive national ballots when he tried to win strike action to save jobs.

Today's miners were different, many commentators argued. They had mortgages, cars, video recorders. The old fighting traditions of 1926 and 1972 were dying amid consumer affluence. Cortonwood would go without a fight, like all the other mines, factories and steel mills which had gone before it.

*A year later*, on 5 March 1985, the miners of Cortonwood marched defiantly back to work behind their branch banner. Across the coal-fields tens of thousands of miners did the same. They had been out on strike for twelve months to prevent pit closures. For the closure of Cortonwood had unleashed one of the most epic struggles ever waged by workers anywhere.

Nothing like it had been seen since the General Strike of 1926. A. J. Cook, the miners' leader during that earlier struggle, told them: 'You have been fighting the legions of hell.' Again in 1984–5 the miners found the legions of hell arrayed against them. All the resources of the state were mobilised to defeat the NUM.

Mining community after mining community was invaded and occupied by paramilitary riot police seeking to protect the handfuls of scabs which the Coal Board gathered together in the hope of breaking the strike. The Department of Health and Social Security sprang into action and countless acts of meanness denied miners' families welfare payments in order to starve them back to work. One couple were denied funeral benefit to bury their son. The courts delivered judgement after judgement designed to weaken the strike, until in December they handed the union's funds to a Tory solicitor who declared: 'I *am* the NUM.' And through it all the press ran a campaign of misinformation and lies.

All this did not break the strikers and their families. With tremendous courage the men and women of the mining villages stood up to the worst that the state could serve out. The women especially were transformed — joining picket lines, travelling round the country speaking, organising soup kitchens, stiffening the backbones of wavering strikers. Rather than surrender, the mining communities did without. They gave up the blessings of affluence — cars, TVs, video recorders, furniture — and continued the struggle.

The heroism and determination of the miners and their families astonished the world and inspired millions. Many who did not regard themselves as socialists and who had been no great admirers of trade



unionism began to see the miners as fighting, not just for themselves, but for all those who wanted to halt the devastation wreaked by the rule of Margaret Thatcher and her equivalents across the globe. In a crazy world where the gyrations of the money markets could make or break entire countries, at last a group of workers was prepared to stand up to the remorseless logic of capital. At last someone had refused to sit and accept the idea that workers should lose their jobs when what they produced was needed but not profitable. When the miners opposed the closure of 'uneconomic' pits they were standing up against a society which puts private profit before social need.

Yet they were, in the end, defeated. It was through no fault of their own. Ned Smith, the Coal Board's industrial relations director for most of the strike, told Channel 4 News on 4 February 1985 that the turning point for the NCB had not been the failure of the NUM to bring out the Nottinghamshire coalfield, where a majority of miners scabbed, but the refusal of the TUC to implement its decision to halt the movement of blackleg coal and oil. The trade union leaders' betrayal of the miners had ensured the strike's defeat.

The miners were beaten because union leaders like Norman Willis of the TUC and David Basnett of the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union failed to stand by them. This was encouraged by Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, who sat on the fence throughout the strike, even-handedly attacking both police and pickets, refusing to stand by the miners' side. The strike's defeat was more than a tragedy. It was a crime.

But when the miners finally returned to work, a year after it had all begun, they did not slink back with heads hung in despair. They returned defiantly, with pride, banners flying and sometimes bands playing. They might have lost, but they weren't crushed. The Tories might have won, but at tremendous cost. They had been forced to spend £26,000 *per miner* to beat the strike, and had failed to break the miners' spirit or their organisation.

This is the story of that extraordinary struggle, of what will go down in history as the Great Miners' Strike of 1984–5. It tells what caused the strike, how it was fought, and why, in the end, it failed. It seeks to draw the lessons of the strike, so that, inspired by the miners' magnificent example, we can build on their achievements, and avenge their defeat.